

The Inky Interview (September 2006)

Interview with Longbarrow Press (Andrew Hirst and Brian Lewis) by David Sissons for The Inky. The interview was conducted jointly with Hirst and Lewis (via email), with most of the responses below attributable to Hirst (the published interview credits Hirst alone).

Would you like to reintroduce Longbarrow Press (featured in The Inky No. 37, Spring 2006) and say how the launch went on 27th April at The Red Deer?

Longbarrow Press has a dual base - Sheffield and Swindon - creating and publishing limited runs of new poetry sequences (ranging across pamphlets, postcards and prints). In part, the press developed from our dissatisfaction with certain aspects of contemporary book design and production. We think that the material object should be as distinctive a 'vehicle of ideas' as the printed word. Our common denominators, at all stages of the creative process, are care and invention for textual pleasure. The launch was framed by readings from three Sheffield poets, each of whom offered new and unpublished work: Chris Jones, reading from *Miniatures* (due from Longbarrow later this year); Matthew Clegg, whose *Nobody Sonnets* sold out its initial run on the night; and Andrew Hirst, closing the evening with a new sequence of poems from *The Frome Primer*. The event was very well attended, inspiring some animated discussion about the ethics and methods of small press production, and it suggested that public interest in this area is, if anything, growing. We've set a night aside during the *Off the Shelf* festival with West House Books, Broken Compass, Cherry on the Top and ourselves, to show the range and vitality that the small poetry presses in Sheffield have to offer. It isn't just our own experiences that are keeping us buoyant but also the help and interest others have shown toward what we're doing.

What about the Swindon connection?

Brian Lewis is the Swindon connection. Longbarrow Press developed over long distances - between here and there. My collaboration with Brian on *The Frome Primer*, which began in 2004, pre-empted the formation of the press and was partly the making of the distance itself. Each of the poems and the photographs of this sequence has a very specific sense of place, but it is the relationship between the poem and the photograph that defines the ground unique to the sequence, not the specific geography. Most of this work has been assembled through the Royal Mail, with as little context or explanation as possible. Brian doesn't reveal details of where the photographs are taken, and subsequently I don't title the poems or give any textual indication of how they came about. We trust to mapping out this psychogeography mainly through instinct.

You mentioned The Frome Primer. Are you from the Frome Valley area and what brought you to Sheffield?

No, I'm not from the Frome region - in fact I've never been there. That's the whole point of the sequence really, the elusive Valhalla of citizenship, of belonging, like in *The Wizard of Oz* or Franz Kafka's *Amerika*. The English are to some extent still clinging to the old ideas of belonging, islanders to the last. The further into the interior you go the more prevalent this idea appears. Frome appeals to me as the last non sequitur, as the most remote and inhospitable place left in England today, (because of its imagined tidy streets and pleasantness, I suppose).

I was brought up first in a mining and then in a fishing community, both of which were subsequently erased. To some extent exile affects everybody today, it's just how you deal with it relationally. In the Tao Te Ching the seer treats his person as if it were foreign to him, and really that's how the sequence came about, that is, from this feeling of being strangers to ourselves. There are lots of city poems in *The Frome Primer* and the ability of modern cities to absorb contradictions is what I use as counterbalance to this negativity. Living in Sheffield fills me with civic pride, its people are open and dignified. I came here, as most people do, on a temporary basis, to study, and I stayed because it is possible to live in the city without fear.

Arthur Rimbaud was at one point writing, 'I is another', but later apparently renouncing everything he'd written and recognising that, far from being a 'seer' he was just a 'peasant'. Though we pass through a succession of identities and wear different masks at different times, isn't there a hard and durable core to identity?

There doesn't need to be a durable core. It seems more pertinent for us to talk of identities in the plural rather than identity as singular. The 'I' as plural, is, as I understood this, multifaceted, scornful, pious, detached and then deeply personal. Pessoa was unable to pin himself down into a single author, let alone a single identity, and I understand his position, adaption is the key to contemporary identity. In some respects it has become possible to see identity as double edged. Firstly there is the identity that is imposed on us as a perimeter by the social (class, race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, etc.). The personal and particular histories below social identification often remain buried, as Foucault makes clear time and again. This leads to the other, more pertinent, sense of identity, that is, to mask and disguise one's social self or to disappear from view completely. If we again return to Kafka's *Amerika*, there's a sense, at the end, lost in the crowd, of Kafka's desire for anonymity. Given the historical circumstances, it's clear why this would be desirable for him. Both these senses of identity thread in and out of the personae in *The Frome Primer*, like a contemporary battle for souls.

What Longbarrow Press seems to be doing is very much what a lot of little presses were doing in the 1960s, and I suppose what the Arts and Crafts people were doing in the late nineteenth century. Are you consciously and deliberately reviving previous trends?

No, we didn't set out to revive previous trends, in fact, I'm not sure we ever even discussed or were aware of their disappearance. I suppose not all Histories are linear. Art, for us, as with any decision we make for the press, is out of necessity, a pragmatic one, as much as it is an aesthetic choice. Of course the Arts and Crafts movement, along with the 1960s small presses, have preceded us, but part of the necessity that informs our work is the desire on our part for people to feel and sense poetry as a total experience, like Blake intended with all those chapbooks and illustrated poems. I'm sure the Arts and Crafts movement felt it before us, as well as the small presses in the 60s. We're not trying to reference past practices (or buck current trends), or be part of a Zeitgeist of new craft skills. We're simply trying to present poetry as we experience it.

Isn't there too much of an 'anything goes' attitude to poetry these days?

We're not against the proliferation of poetry of any sort per se, if it helps take it away from the specialists and back into the public domain. The problem with this approach is that poetry as an art form can lose its distinction and be perceived as window dressing, as a means of authenticating or prettifying failed or unpopular public spaces. The current trend of 'popularising' poetry isn't that interesting really. Who is it for and who is it by - Brecht, Mandelstam or Seifert? Genuinely proletarian poets don't become any more popular because of it.

I'd be hard pressed to remember a single line from Charles Bukowski's poems, but I remember Charles Lamb's Old Familiar Faces in its entirety. Does that make me a sentimentalist?

It's arguable that Bukowski's work expresses a concern with - and responsibility to - methods of documentation which might exempt his poetry (and his prose) from a direct comparison. However, the question is an interesting one. Is the primary obligation of poetry that of preserving sentiment (*pace* Wordsworth), and, if so, how does this obligation support or conflict with its other values? It seems apposite (in the context of *The Frome Primer*) to consider the parallels with photography. We make and esteem photographs according to these principal criteria, their usefulness as records (of events, for example) and their sentimental value. These criteria are not fixed or exclusive, but they might help us to understand how memory works on photography (as well as in poetry), how it drives and shapes the photograph and our responses to it. The spare, ambiguous images used for *The Frome Primer* do not obviously fulfil either criterion; this shifts the burden of context, asking the reader to make their own connections between the poems and the photographs of the sequence, the weight (of meaning, memory and sentiment) shifting from one to the other and coming somewhere in between. It seems, with both identity and sentiment, that giving the power of meaning back to the individual (e.g. the reader) might well forge new sentiments and identities.